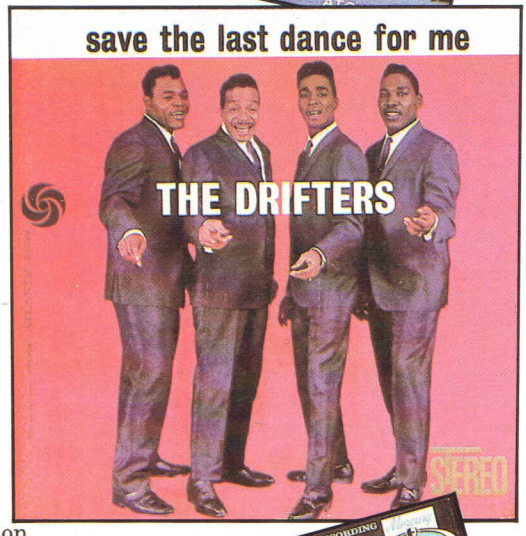
The Alchemists

Or how plain doo-wop became pure gold

The Drifters, the Coasters and the Platters were among the most successful and influential singing groups in the history of rock. The styles they practised – from the romantic but innovatory late-Fifties Drifters recordings, through the raw humour of the Coasters to the smooth confections of the Platters – were very different. But the groups had two things in common. All were in direct descent from the classic 'doo-wop' tradition, and all three owed a great deal of their distinctiveness to individuals outside the groups themselves.

The singers were directed and controlled by managers, producers and writers who set the elements of doo-wop against sounds from other traditions to provide the essential twist which made these groups unique. And yet there is no sense in which the singers were puppets, merely manipulated by those outside them. Johnny Moore's voice was as essential to the success of 'Under The Boardwalk' as was Bert Berns' production; and the gloriously suggestive bass voice of the Coasters' Bobby Nunn was always full of individual personality. It was the combination of men with a broad vision and singers who could fit into that vision that led to the final recorded achievements. And this combination opens up the question of who was really responsible for these achievements; was it the singer or the song? The artist or the man who put him in the right context?



There is an additional problem when discussing the importance of managers or producers as opposed to singers and musicians: namely, that managers tend to be more articulate than those they manage. The desire to present oneself in a favourable or over-important light is a common phenomenon when discussing past events. And the fact that Buck Ram, for example, had a superior education to any of the members of the Platters gave him a head start in writing the history of the group. But even if this proviso is accepted, the fact that the Coasters, Drifters and Platters were so successful does still seem to owe much to outside direction.

Doo-wop's limitations

Doo-wop had grown to be a form of vocal music in which the various voices had set roles. The style could accommodate great individuals – such as Clyde McPhatter – but the parts for each voice did tend to be set, so that the possibility of breaking really new ground was limited. Many of the greatest solo singers had an unsettled career, going from group to group like Clyde McPhatter, or finally settling, like Ben E. King, on a solo singing career.

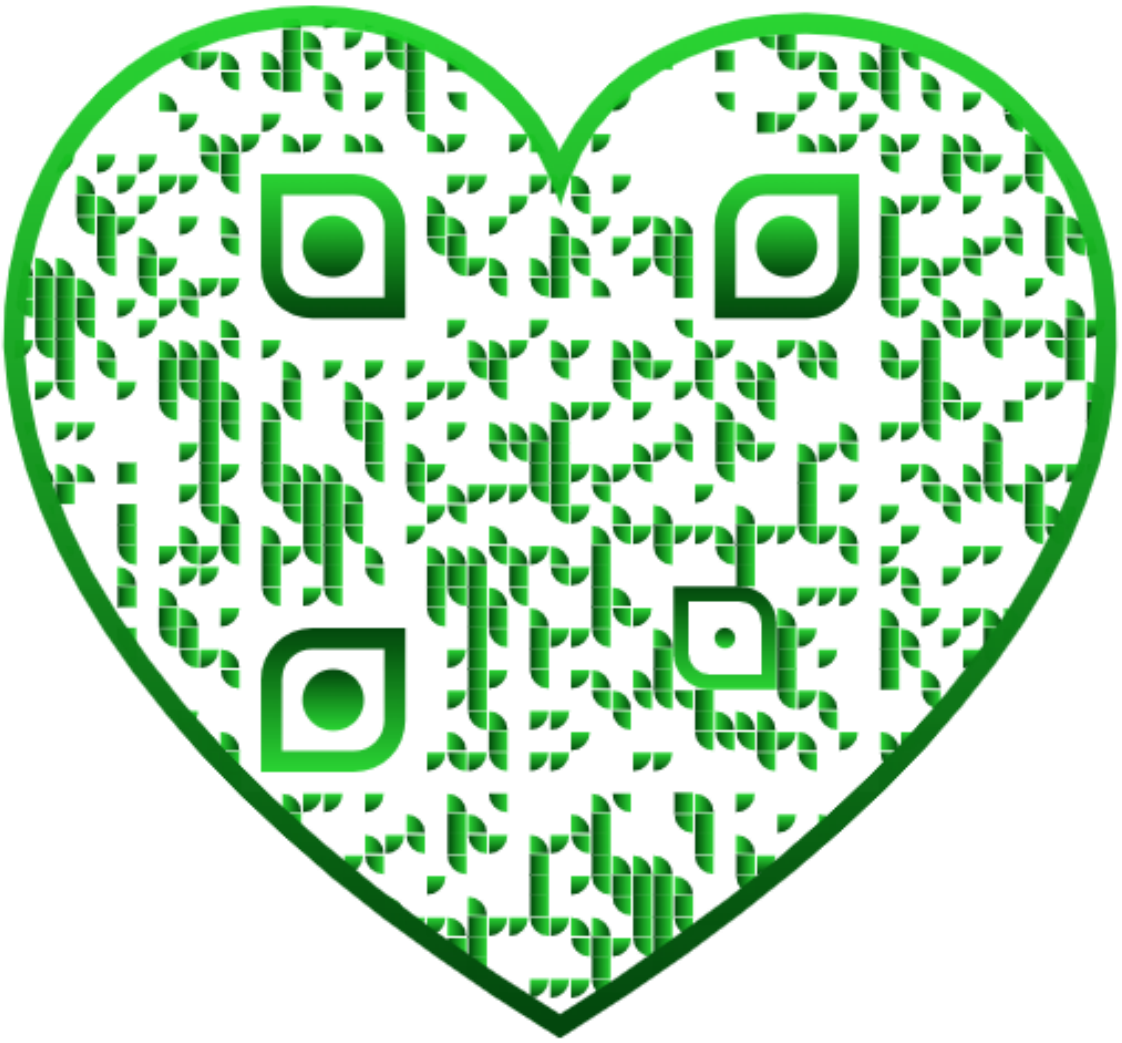
If the relative inflexibility of roles within the group minimised the possibility of innovation, so too did the fact that the members of the group were often singers pure and simple, without the instrumental expertise or general musical knowledge necessary to rearrange the elements of their music. There was always a tendency for doo-wop groups to be directed from outside – Billy Ward's Dominoes, for example, had a series of great singers, including McPhatter and Jackie Wilson, who were directed by the non-singing leader – so perhaps it is not surprising that the most distinctive singing groups should be controlled by people who were not singers themselves.

The people who organised the Drifters, Coasters and Platters were from disparate backgrounds, but they all possessed the same two qualities. The first was a clear musical sense of what was possible with the material to hand – what could be done with the style and the singers who were performing it – and the second was an unflinching determination to succeed in the business, to succeed financially in spite of the difficulties involved.

Pushing the Platters

The Platters were directed by Buck Ram. His qualifications for the task were that he was a skilled arranger and musician who had worked with some of the best big bands of the Forties, while on the business side he was a qualified lawyer. Ram has made some scathing remarks about his musical problems with the original group; but he would not deny that in Tony Williams the group possessed an entrancing lead voice that fitted perfectly into the smooth sounds the manager desired. For Ram realised that the close harmony of a doo-wop group could be given an extra veneer if it was backed up by shimmering orchestral arrangements, rather than by the perfunctory accompaniment from a small instrumental group which was doo-wop's more usual backdrop. Using Williams' voice to front banks of strings on lush ballads and building the group's image as a sophisticated international act, Ram was able to turn a modest West Coast quartet into one of the best-selling acts of the Fifties.

The Platters were successful, but their hits had a sickly tinge to them which makes their achievements far less impressive, in retrospect, than the work of the Coasters and Drifters. Both of these groups had a profound influence on the future development of



Left: The team that cut the best comedy discs of the Fifties. Standing, from left, are Lester Sill, Jerry Wexler, the four members of the Coasters and Ahmet Ertegun. Leiber and Stoller are seated at the piano. Below: Mike Stoller (left) and Jerry Leiber. Bottom left: The Drifters pose for publicity photos with manager George Treadwell (centre) in 1964.

rock, and once again the critical factors lay outside the group members themselves. It was no coincidence, for example, that both groups recorded for the Atlantic label. The top management there was more attuned to the possibilities – both commercial and musical – inherent in black musical styles than that of any other record company of the Fifties. Ahmet Ertegun and Jerry Wexler in particular were determined to get the results that they wanted, and Wexler, for example, forced the Drifters to record 'Under The Boardwalk' when the group professed themselves uninterested in the song. And Wexler made sure that the groups were produced to the standard necessary; when the team of Leiber and Stoller left Atlantic, Wexler himself and Bert Berns took over the direction of the session from which 'Under The Boardwalk' came.

Writing and producing

The most immediate musical link between the Drifters and Coasters came, however, from Leiber and Stoller themselves. They had written for (and produced) the Coasters from the early Fifties, and their influence on the Drifters (with whom they began working in 1958) were equally profound. With the Coasters, the duo married some of the most amusing lyrics in rock with bouncy tunes based on classics of the R&B and blues tradition. In doing so they created records that perfectly suited the voices of the group; and, in production, they made sure that exactly the right voice came up at the right time, and that the instrumentation – especially the bubbling sax of King Curtis – added a precise and distinctive effect to the whole sound.

With the Drifters, who were in a more romantic tradition than the Coasters, Leiber and Stoller developed different sounds. The keening strings – far less cloying than those used with the Platters – had a wide influence; but probably more important was the use of Latin-American rhythms. These were one of the important staging posts on the road to the beat of the mid Sixties, when the 6/8 shuffle rhythm typical of Fifties rock'n'roll was replaced as rock's most common rhythmic basis by even quavers – compare Elvis Presley's 'Blue Suede Shoes' with the Beatles' 'Twist and Shout' to hear the difference. The duo's work with the Drifters was crucial to that change.

Even after they had left Atlantic in the early Sixties Leiber and Stoller showed their talent for dealing with vocal groups. At the Red Bird label they proved their ability in producing light bouncy music with the Dixie Cups, a trio whose hits, once again, were the result of their inspired direction.

Apart from Leiber and Stoller, the managers of these two groups were important. Coasters'

mentor Lester Sill (he had actually invented their name to give them an identity as a West Coast group) was steeped in the music business. He was able to continue the group through changes of personnel and through professional ups and downs. George Treadwell, the ex-big band trumpeter who ran the Drifters had even more problems with personnel; the unreliability of some members, and the difficult personalities of others culminated in his decision to sack the whole group. His subsequent recruitment of Ben E. King and the Crowns to take over the name and the changes of lead vocalist during the next few years seem, perhaps, proof that the direction of these singing groups was far more important than the contribution of any single member.

This raises the general question of management and production in rock. Are these functions really more important than the abilities of the artists themselves? The answer probably varies with the individuals concerned. With above-average artists with whom he has a creative – but not necessarily amicable – relationship, a good producer or manager can perhaps achieve something new. Conversely, a great talent, like Gene Vincent, is probably going to come up with something impressive however incompetent his management or unsympathetic the studio surroundings are for him.

Then there are those artists who would not be able to function unless they had final control over most aspects of their career – Bob Dylan and Brian Wilson, for example. And there are great stars whose music and career have undoubtedly been influenced by others, but to what extent it is impossible to say. How far was Elvis affected by Sam Phillips or by Colonel Parker? How important to the Beatles were Brian Epstein and George Martin?

This is where the magic – the alchemy – comes in. The processes by which some combinations produce great music while other – even similar – combinations produce merely average results probably defy analysis. All we know is that in the music of the Platters, Coasters, and Drifters a group of alchemists found the extra ingredients which turned plain doo-wop into gold.

ASHLEY BROWN

Above: Buck Ram (centre), the man who ran the show for the Platters, accepts a gold disc on behalf of the group from Mercury Records executives. Below: The Dixie Cups, who had a million-seller with their first disc, 'Chapel Of Love', on Leiber and Stoller's Red Bird label in 1964.

ROCK '59

1959 saw the extension of a number of trends already visible in the previous year. One of the most interesting was the growing success of the new breed of opportunist, independent record labels that cashed in on the rock'n'roll boom. For their part, the major labels regained the initiative which they had briefly lost in the mid Fifties, and were now happily pumping out a 'manufactured' brand of rock'n'roll; it was no coincidence that the Chipmunks were at the top of the US charts with a novelty record when the year opened. The novelty trend continued during 1959 with the Coasters as the most successful exponents of the genre – 'Charlie Brown' got to Number 2.

The first wave of rock'n'roll had passed and there was little chart activity from the old rockers. Only Fats Domino – and to a lesser extent Chuck Berry – had much success in 1959. This was the year of the teen idols and their progress was reflected in the charts: Paul Anka (4 hits), Ricky Nelson (6), Frankie Avalon (7), Fabian (7), Connie Francis (7) and Pat Boone (7). But perhaps the most significant pointer to the future happened in far-off Liverpool, England, in November when a group of teenagers reformed their old band to become the Silver Beatles.

Connie Francis, who struck gold with 'Lipstick On Your Collar'.

January

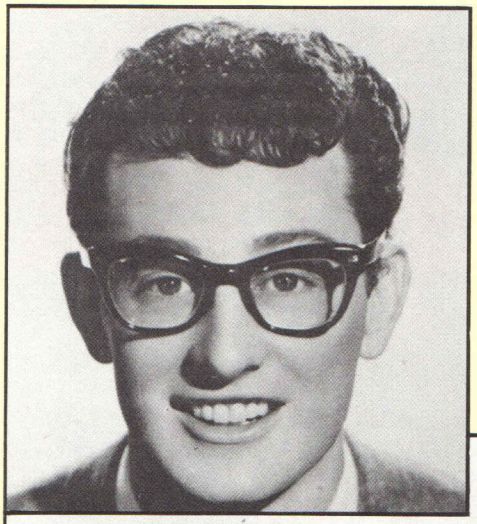
The Chipmunks' novelty disc, the 'Chipmunk Song', is the US Number 1 record as the New Year begins.
Berry Gordy borrows 800 dollars from friends and family and founds the Tamla Motown record label.
1 Frank Sinatra voted 'Favourite Male Star' by a *Billboard* magazine poll of American DJs.
22 Buddy Holly makes his last recording, in his New York apartment.
24 Elvis Presley's 'I Got Stung' goes straight into the British charts at Number 2 – it makes the Number 1 slot a week later.

February

3 'The day the music died' – the plane carrying Buddy Holly, the Big Bopper and Ritchie Valens crashes at Clear Lake, Iowa, killing all the occupants.
14 Ray Charles voted 'Number 1 New Star' in a *Melody Maker* critics' poll.
15 Lloyd Price's version of 'Stagger Lee' becomes the US Number 1.
Frankie Avalon makes it into the US charts with 'Venus', later to become his first Number 1 record.
18 Elvis Presley makes an unscheduled singing appearance at the Lido night-club in Paris while on leave from the Army.
28 Coral Records bring out a Buddy Holly memorial album entitled *The Buddy Holly Story*.
'Smoke Gets in Your Eyes' by the Platters becomes Number 1 in the UK.

March

7 A Peter Sellers comedy record receives *Billboard's* 'Pick of the Week' award.
14 Fabian voted 'the most promising new male vocalist of the year' by the viewers of Dick Clark's 'American Bandstand' TV show.
The 'Gramdeck' arrives on the UK market, priced 13 guineas. This device was claimed to be able to convert a standard record player into a tape recorder.
28 GAC organise a 'Biggest Show of Stars, Spring Edition' starring Lloyd Price, Clyde McPhatter, the Coasters, the Crests, Bo Diddley, and Little Anthony and the Imperials.



Buddy Holly (left) victim of a plane crash (below) in February.

April

Larry Parnes organises his stable of stars – including Marty Wilde, Billy Fury, Dickie Pride, Johnny Gentle and Duffy Power – to appear on the British TV shows 'Oh Boy!' and 'Drumbeat'.
18 Cliff Richard's first LP *'Cliff'* is released, having been recorded in front of an invited audience.
23 Jack Good, producer of 'Oh Boy!', is signed up as independent A&R man for Decca.
25 Elvis Presley's latest single, 'A Fool Such As I' goes straight to Number 4 in the UK charts.

May

9 *Melody Maker* introduces a Jukebox Top Twenty, compiled from 2000 jukeboxes throughout Britain, as part of its chart listings. Their first Number 1 is Presley's 'A Fool Such As I', followed by Buddy Holly's 'It Doesn't Matter Anymore' and 'Charlie Brown' by the Coasters.
24 Chubby Checker makes the US charts for the first time with 'The Class'.
25 Mahalia Jackson headlines a five-hour show of folk, gospel and spiritual music at Madison Square Garden.

June

1 Johnny Horton has one of the biggest chart successes of the year with the country-pop song 'The Battle Of New Orleans' which remains at Number 1 in the US charts for six weeks.
7 Paul Anka's 'Lonely Boy' begins its climb up the US charts to the Number 1 spot. 'Lonely Boy' was the second of Anka's four hits of 1959.
12 'Big Hunk Of Love' by Elvis Presley enters the US charts and remains there for 14 weeks.
28 Chuck Berry is back in the charts with 'Back In The USA'.

Marty Wilde, mobbed by fans on 'Oh Boy!'

July
11 Cliff Richard's 'Livin' Doll' enters the British charts and remains there for 18 weeks, reaching Number 1 in August.
12 Ray Charles' classic 'What'd I Say' enters the Hot Hundred.
19 Sun Records and Johnny Cash have a chart success with 'Katy Too'.
27 Dinah Washington makes her chart debut with 'What A Difference A Day Makes'.

Johnny Horton, who had a massive hit with 'The Battle Of New Orleans'.

August
Colonel Parker claims Elvis receives 67,000 fan letters a week, even though he is in the US Army.
13 Bobby Darin signs a six-year film contract with Paramount which is expected to bring him close to one million dollars.
15 Craig Douglas enters the UK charts with 'Only Sixteen'.
17 Dave Lynch, Tony Williams, Herb Reed and Paul Robi of the Platters are reportedly found with 19-year-old girls in their Cincinnati hotel and charged with aiding and abetting prostitution.
27 Marty Wilde tells his public, 'I want to drop most of the rock stuff and do real class ballad stuff like Sinatra' before starting a new ABC-TV series, 'Boy Meets Girl'.
28 20-year-old Top Rank pianist Tony Hatch opens a series on the TV show 'At Your Request'.
29 Chuck Berry arrested and charged with violation of the Mann Act – the transportation of a minor across a state line for immoral purposes.

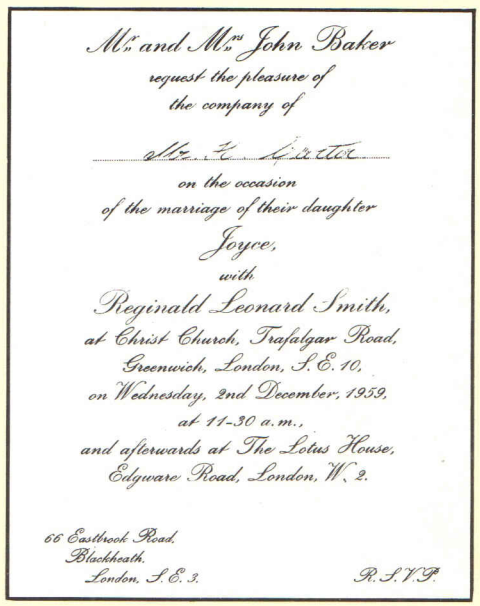
September
Robert Zimmerman leaves home for Minnesota Art College and there changes his name to Bob Dylan.
6 The BBC disc review series 'Juke Box Jury' is given a 13-week extension.
Eddie Cochran has a minor chart hit (reaching 58 in US Hot Hundred) with 'Somethin' Else'; it is his last chart success in the US.
24 Tommy Steele signs a £100,000 contract for a 10-week tour of Australia.

October
2 Petula Clark flies to Paris to star in a French TV show scheduled for broadcast in the New Year.
11 'Bad Girl' on the Chess label gives Smokey Robinson and the Miracles their first chart hit. They subsequently move to Tamla Motown.
18 The Drifters follow up their June chart success 'There Goes My Baby' with a new disc entitled 'Dance With Me'.
25 Dion and the Belmonts enter the US charts with 'A Lover's Prayer'.

November
Marty Wilde marries Joyce Baker of the Vernon Girls.
Liverpool group the Quarrymen disband and then reform as the Silver Beatles.
15 'There I've Said It Again' gives Sam Cooke his third Hot Hundred success of the year.
28 Tommy Steele releases 'Little White Bull', signalling his departure from rock'n'roll to the wider field of family entertainment.

December
Release of new Presley LP, *50,000,000 Elvis Fans Can't Be Wrong*; it later becomes a gold record.
5 Gene Vincent arrives at London's Heathrow airport to appear on Jack Good's 'Boy Meets Girl' TV show.
6 Bill Black, Elvis Presley's former bass player, has his first solo chart success with a record entitled 'Smokie – Part 2'.

ADRIAN GILBERT



Mr. and Mrs. John Baker
request the pleasure of
the company of
Mr. E. Smith
on the occasion
of the marriage of their daughter
Joyce,
with
Reginald Leonard Smith,
at Christ Church, Trafalgar Road,
Greenwich, London, S.E.10,
on Wednesday, 2nd December, 1959,
at 11-30 a.m.,
and afterwards at The Lotus House,
Edgware Road, London, W.2.

66 Eastbrook Road,
Blackheath,
London, S.E.3.

R.S.V.P.

Above: An invitation to the wedding of Marty Wilde (Reg Smith). Below: GI Elvis.

LEIBER & STOLLER

White songs for black groups

LEIBER AND STOLLER. There are few non-performer songwriters as well-known in the short history of rock'n'roll, and fewer still whose imprimatur immediately suggests certain qualities: wit and urbanity; professionalism and idiomatic warmth; hipness, calculation and artistic pretension. With 31 years of collaboration behind them, they described themselves, in Jerry Leiber's characteristically sardonic formulation, as 'the longest running partnership – since when? Gilbert and Solomon?' 'None of them,' murmurs Mike Stoller, 'had the ability to withstand pain like we did.'

Even in conversation their talents complement each other. Jerry, whom *Time* once described as 'bouncy, wordy, and uncertain,' sets the pace, his manner sharp, his gravelly voice alternately expressing engagement and mild exasperation, his verbal agility steering a comfortable path between candour and diplomatic evasion. Stoller, whom his partner has described as withdrawn and 'practically comatose' when they met, speaks slowly, carefully, with a precise memory for names and dates and an almost painfully unassuming manner.

Both Leiber and Stoller are sophisticated, quick-witted and socially, culturally and artistically *engagé* – probably much like their original models, Cole Porter, Johnny Mercer and George Gershwin. Their work, however, takes its inspiration not from high society but from low; their acknowledged masterpieces are 'Hound Dog', 'Kansas City', 'Along Came Jones' and 'Jailhouse Rock'.

These were cultural landmarks for a generation that seemingly eschewed 'culture' and demanded to be let in on the secret of real life/street life. Leiber and Stoller offered their services as guides, provided both authenticity and art, and did it with clarity, good humour, and an absence of condescension. In doing so they provided a link not only with pop music's past but with its future as well, maintaining craft even as they opened up new vistas for white teenagers, creating form even in the midst of a revolution that – like so many other instant explosions before and since – insisted on the myth of its own spontaneous generation.

Blues from Baltimore

They met in 1950 out in LA where Leiber had moved with his mother in 1945 and Stoller had gone with his family the year before. Leiber was writing blues lyrics, a product, he has said, of growing up in a poor neighbourhood in Baltimore where he always associated with black people, always felt comfortable with black people. He had a drummer friend at Fairfax High writing the melodies, but this didn't prove satisfactory, and the drummer told him of Mike Stoller.

Stoller, a freshman at City College, had grown up on Long Island, New York, falling in love first with boogie-woogie then with bebop. 'Where I lived was not an integrated neighbourhood, but I went to summer camp at a very early age – it was a totally integrated summer camp ... my interest in black music came from listening to the older black kids playing piano, an old upright piano they used to have in the barn there.' At 10 or 11 he took a few lessons, remarkably enough, from the great 'stride' pianist, James P. Johnson. 'I used to love to listen to him play. He always had a bottle of Southern Comfort on the piano – which I think shocked me a little. I mean, whiskey – right?'

Meeting in California they discovered in each other, in Leiber's words, 'a buddy from a secret organisation'. 'There were not', Stoller has said with typical understatement, 'as many young white people who were involved with that kind of music at that particular time.' In fact there were hardly any, and the initial reaction Leiber and Stoller encountered from the black artists to whom they tried to peddle their tunes was – encouraging. 'If they showed anything outside of what they might have showed anyone else, it was mild amusement, and they were a little bit surprised that our work was as "on" as it was.' Explained Stoller: 'We tried, particularly in the early days, to be what we felt was "authentic", lyrically and musically.'

Evidently they were, because within a year of their meeting they not only had several of their blues compositions recorded live (by Floyd Dixon and Jimmy Witherspoon among others) at DJ Gene Norman's annual Blues Jubilee; through the help of Lester Sill, sales manager for the Bihari brothers' Modern Records, they also had their first record issued, 'That's What The Good Book Says', by the Robins. 'That, of course, was the big thrill, the affirmation of it being real, even with our names misspelled [Lieber and Stroller], as they were most of the first early years.' By February 1952, they had enjoyed their first national R&B hit, Charles Brown's 'Hard Times'. They were all of 18 years old.

The black lifestyle

'We found ourselves writing for black artists,' Jerry Leiber told their biographer Bob Palmer, 'because those were the voices and rhythms we loved. By the fall of 1950, when both Mike and I were in City College, we had black girlfriends and were into a black lifestyle.' This integration, they insist, was casual and without the single-minded determination of Johnny Otis, the famous R&B bandleader who passed for black and 'never even associated with white people'.

To Otis, looking back with the memory of a bitter court battle (which he ultimately lost) over the copyright to 'Hound Dog', Leiber and Stoller were 'young kids, they would bring songs, and I would help rewrite them. For instance, once they had a song that had razor-cuttin' and gin-drinkin' and dice-shootin', and they didn't understand that this was derogatory to black people. They were just young guys who meant well, they weren't racist in any sense of the word.'

To Leiber and Stoller what they were doing was the product of a legitimate passion, and when they met Big Mama Thornton, one of Otis' featured singers, they were inspired to write 'Hound Dog'

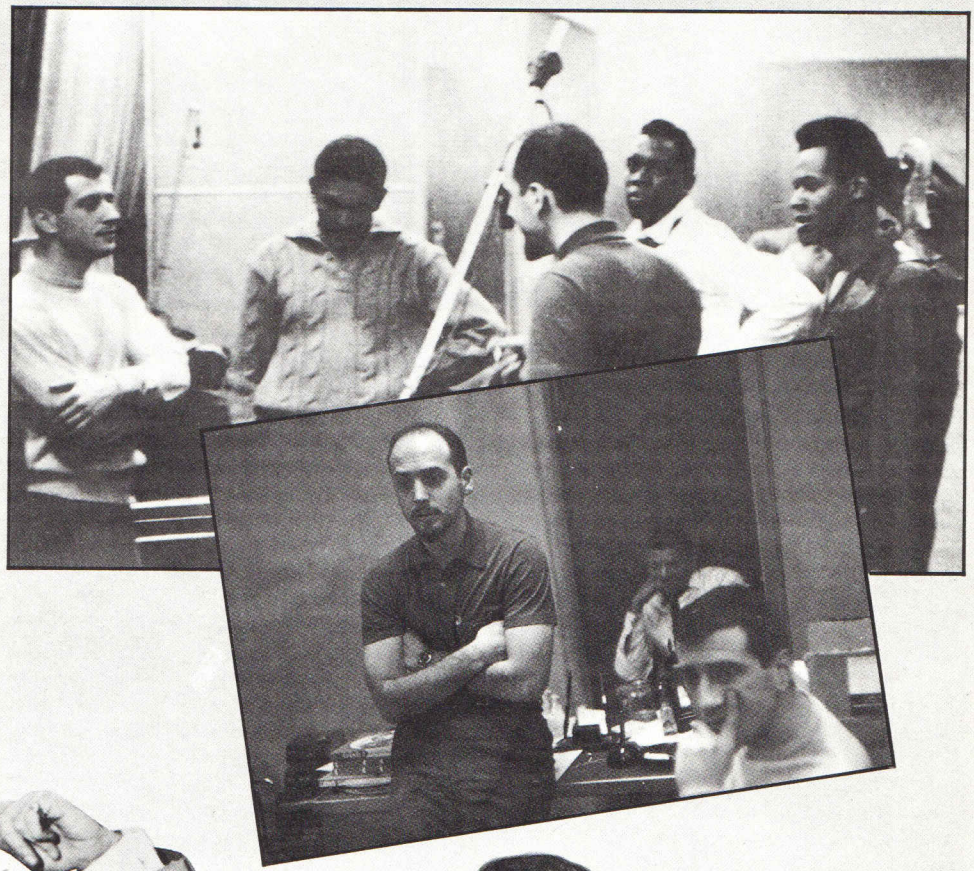
for her—and to fight Otis for the credit when the song came out with his name on it. That was their first monster hit, which entered the charts in early 1953 but had been recorded in the previous August. Also in 1952 their names appeared on 'Kansas City', known in its original version by Little Willie Littlefield as 'K. C. Loving'. (Littlefield has claimed that *he* wrote the tune and sold it in a moment of weakness, but Leiber and Stoller have shrugged this off as sour grapes.)

A Spark with Sill

For the most part, business was on the up and up in 1952-53, although few of the label owners were willing to pay properly. 'If you sold 100,000 records, you might get paid on 60 – you just knew it, that was the rule of thumb. But they were all very nice to us.' In any case by this time they were bored, and prepared for one of the periodic readjustments that have taken place throughout their professional life. In partnership with Lester Sill in 1953 they started their own record company, Spark, and entered into the world of full-scale production, promotion, packaging: the record business.

What Leiber and Stoller set out to do artistically represented a distinct departure from the world of straight-ahead blues which they had already conquered. They took a group, the Robins, with whom they had been associated from the beginning, and wrote songs for them which were modelled on the Atlantic work of the Clovers. Leiber has called them 'playlets' and 'little burlesque inventions'. So successful in fact were they with this new

Opposite: Mike Stoller (left) and Jerry Leiber, songwriters extraordinary. Below: With members of the Coasters, and (inset) listening to a Coasters playback, 1959. Bottom: Bandleader Johnny Otis kids around with one of the Three Tons of Joy. Otis was an early mentor to Leiber and Stoller – although they later sued him over the rights to 'Hound Dog'.



form – producing 'Riot In Cell Block Number 9', 'Framed', 'Smokey Joe's Cafe' (all 1955) – that Atlantic bought out Spark, took on the Robins and renamed them the Coasters, and hired Leiber and Stoller as the first independent producers in the business.

So it was that in 1956 they moved back to the East Coast, worked briefly as A&R heads at RCA and then embarked on the string of successes with the Coasters which remains their best-known work. They were 'behind the scenes' men. Despite Nesuhi Ertegun's urging they never even thought about recording themselves, because the whole idea of a white blues singer seemed totally unauthentic at the time; and yet they were as much the *auteurs* of the finished work as if they had sung every part and played all the instruments themselves.

Those humorous vignettes, which sound so spontaneous with their call-and response – 'Look-a there, look-a there, look-a there' – disbelieving bass voice and King Curtis' spluttering sax, were sometimes the product of as many as 60 takes and countless splices to do everything from minimising the sibilants to getting the timing just right. They controlled every sound on the record. As Stoller has said: 'I don't mean to say that we put a clamp on anybody's head, but we were controlling ... There was a design for every record. Absolutely. From the beginning to the end.' They formed a two-decade relationship with the Coasters based on shared enthusiasms and genuine respect – but never had the slightest curiosity to see the Coasters perform during this entire period. They were indeed 'behind the scenes' men.

With the Drifters – 'Save The Last Dance For Me' (1960), 'Up On The Roof', and 'On Broadway' (both 1963) – they carried this style of technical overlay to an even greater degree, even introducing strings to R&B in a crazy mélange of Rimsky-Korsakov, Borodin and deep-down gospel-shouting soul on 'There Goes My Baby' (1959). The production techniques which they pioneered were later adopted and extended by a young assistant and guitar player from the West Coast, Phil Spector, but for Leiber and Stoller even the Drifters' music was getting beyond what they had set out to do.

Tapping other talent

After these initial hits (it was mid-career for the Drifters, who had already been through several metamorphoses), and apart from outstanding exceptions like 'Spanish Harlem' (Ben E. King's first solo hit) which Leiber wrote with Spector, they assigned the writing of the songs to protégés like Barry Mann and Cynthia Weil or Gerry Goffin and Carole King.

'We could write any kind of a song,' Leiber has said, without exaggeration, 'but I think we preferred either straight blues or those burlesque inventions that we did for the Coasters.' The straight romantic blues ballads were, for them, not quite as inspiring. But they still had a combination of professionalism and passion that enabled them to write for Perry Como and Jaye P. Morgan at the same time as they were creating a new teenage vocabulary.

And then there was Elvis. The work with Elvis does not fit neatly into any logical progression, because there was nothing logical about it. It was pure accident that Elvis included 'Hound Dog' in his act in 1956 and then was persuaded by RCA to record it. When he did, Leiber and Stoller, who had an affiliation with his publishers, Hill and Range, were invited to submit more songs. They suggested several titles, and he chose 'Love Me'. According to Leiber it was originally written almost as a spoof of country and western style. 'For us, "Love Me" was really what Homer and Jethro might have done to a legitimate lyric – or Spike Jones. But then it was taken seriously. And we never argued.'

The success of 'Love Me' led to more numbers being cut, movie soundtrack deals, and great songs like 'Jailhouse Rock' (1957) that were written to order. In many ways it was an ideal marriage between two writers who had captured the perfect irony of the age and the artist who personified it. Leiber and Stoller may have appreciated Elvis – 'He knew an awful lot of songs. ... We didn't think that any white boy would know about that kind of stuff, and he surprised us' – but they found the musical constrictions

Leiber and Stoller take a break from producing Stealer's Wheel at the Apple Studios in London, July 1972.

stifling. 'If something didn't fall within the parameters of three or four different styles – a country-blues ballad, a shuffle-rhythm tune with a certain content, a verse chorus hook with a certain sound in it – if it didn't fall within the parameters of something that was very familiar to them, they wouldn't consider it. And for us it got to be rather boring – fulfilling that obligation. We actually did stop writing for Elvis because of that.'

Red Bird bubblegum

Eventually they also left Atlantic. 'At the time,' said Leiber, 'our objectives were that we wanted to make a lot of money. And I guess we were a little bit cynical and a little bit depressed with the scene.' So they went back to freelancing and then, in 1964, started up their own label, Red Bird, in partnership with George Goldner, entrepreneur of the first order. With their know-how and Goldner's genius for salesmanship it became a staggering financial success and a treasure house – for bubblegum music.

What happened was that after a number of failures with songs they really believed in – and when their bank account was running low – Leiber bumped into George Goldner. 'He was out of a record company, out of a job, and looking for some action, and I offered him a partnership in the label.' Goldner stayed up all night listening to acetates, and when they came into the office the next morning he held up one and said, 'I stake my life on this record.' He played it, and it was 'Chapel of Love' by the Dixie Cups. Although Leiber hated the record, Goldner issued the disc and it sold a million.

That success largely determined the character of Red Bird Records, but within two years Leiber and Stoller had become disenchanted and sold their shares to Goldner in 1966. 'We said, "You know what? It's hanging us up." And we sold our shares in the company to George Goldner and said, "Enough. We got to move on." Which is something we usually do every five or seven years. Catharsis – on some level.'

In 1967 Leiber and Stoller produced several excellent Coasters records for CBS but they were not well promoted. During the next three years they invested their wealth by purchasing music publishing companies. Forays into the studio were rare but a hit usually resulted. In October 1971 they bought the world-famous Starday-King company for 1.5 million dollars. They produced the Coasters' 'Love Potion Number 9', but nothing else sold as well as that and in 1973 the company was up for sale again. During trips to the UK they produced records for Stealer's Wheel, Procol Harum and Elkie Brooks.

What comes across most sharply when they recount their professional lives together – apart from the almost staggering catalogue of achievements involved – is how easy it all seems in retrospect, what smooth sailing two 17-year-olds in search of adventure had in shark-infested waters. For both Leiber and Stoller the sharks did not exist. The business that they knew was made up of ex-schoolteachers like Leo Mesner or label salesmen-turned-mambo-dancers such as George Goldner, small businessmen whose only fault was to believe too much in the American system of free enterprise. Race was no obstacle, at least as far as family and friends were concerned, the disagreement with Johnny Otis was essentially a business disagreement, and the breaks with Atlantic, Phil Spector, even the Coasters are all glossed over. The one rule of thumb has been that whatever they did they 'had to be excited' by it.

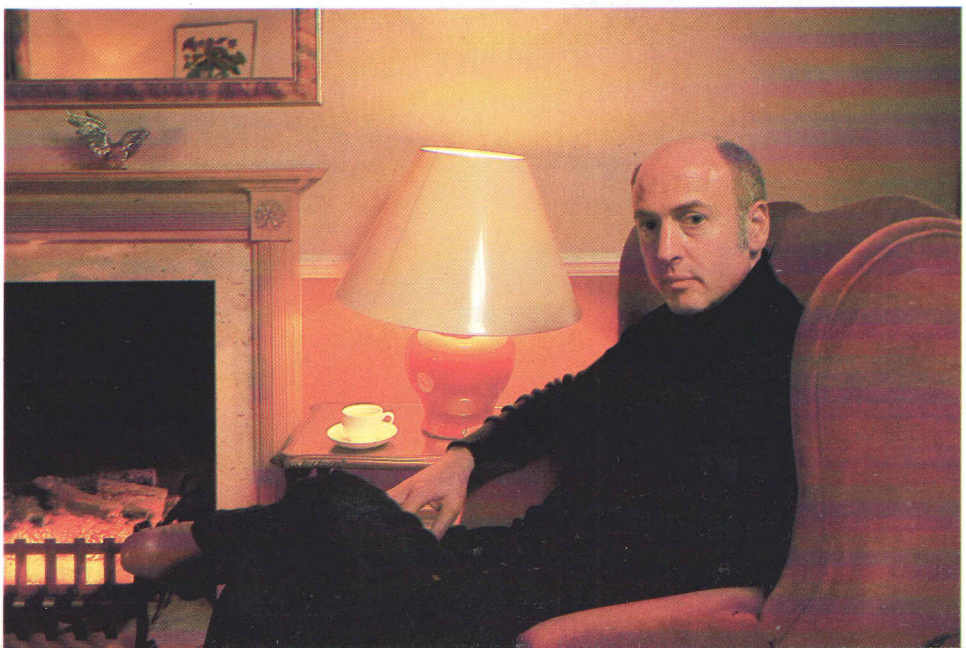
Above: The writers of 'Jailhouse Rock' and 'Hound Dog' look over the music with Elvis. Below: Stoller in later years.

In any case you get the feeling that all of this is long ago and far away. What they are interested in right now is establishing themselves as 'serious' artists. 'We've always,' says Jerry Leiber, 'had a broader spectrum of interest than our early work might indicate.' Which might or might not be a statement to be taken literally. Or perhaps it is just another form of the same hip self-deprecation which permeates their talk, which never admits too clear-cut a goal or too straightforward a satisfaction if the goal is actually achieved.

They continue to write – movies, theatrical projects, mordant cabaret numbers as well as the more usual pop songs – blocking out words and music separately, working intensely for a time and then taking several weeks off. Mostly they write at one another's apartments, though they still maintain an office on the Brill Building's 11th floor. If some of their more recent projects haven't clicked, they remain forward-looking, restless, wary, holding on to the cautious, not-quite-satiric pessimism which animates all of their best work. As Jerry Leiber says, in a composition which both call, perhaps without undue irony, 'as simple and straightforward a song of joy as Jerry Leiber is capable of writing':

I'm feelin' too good today
I'm feelin' the way I shouldn't
I'm feelin' too good today
If I had my way I wouldn't
I'm feelin' too cheerful
Quick, slip me an earful of bad news
I'm feelin' too good today
I've got them feelin' too good today
blues.

PETER GURALNICK



UNDER THE BOARDWALK

The Drifters enjoyed 20 years of hit-making

THE DRIFTERS are an institution. Very few vocal groups have remained popular for almost 30 years, and in an area notable for its lack of consistency the Drifters' longevity is almost without parallel. The skills of their producers and songwriters – from Jerry Wexler and Ahmet Ertegun in the Fifties to Roger Cook and Roger Greenaway in the Seventies – have enabled the group to develop new styles and to keep their career afloat for three decades.

The Drifters' sound evolved from the music of the Ink Spots and the Mills Brothers, groups that put close harmony to the songs of Tin Pan Alley before and during the Second World War. The Drifters made a radical departure from this pleasing but conventional ballad style by singing with a vitality that was not widely heard outside Negro churches. By introducing gospel to popular music, the group helped create the beginnings of rock'n'roll and in the early Fifties rapidly became the most popular act among black record-buyers. Then, as rock'n'roll was replaced by softer beat-ballads, the Drifters increased their popularity among white audiences without losing a grip on the R&B market.

Distinctive innovations

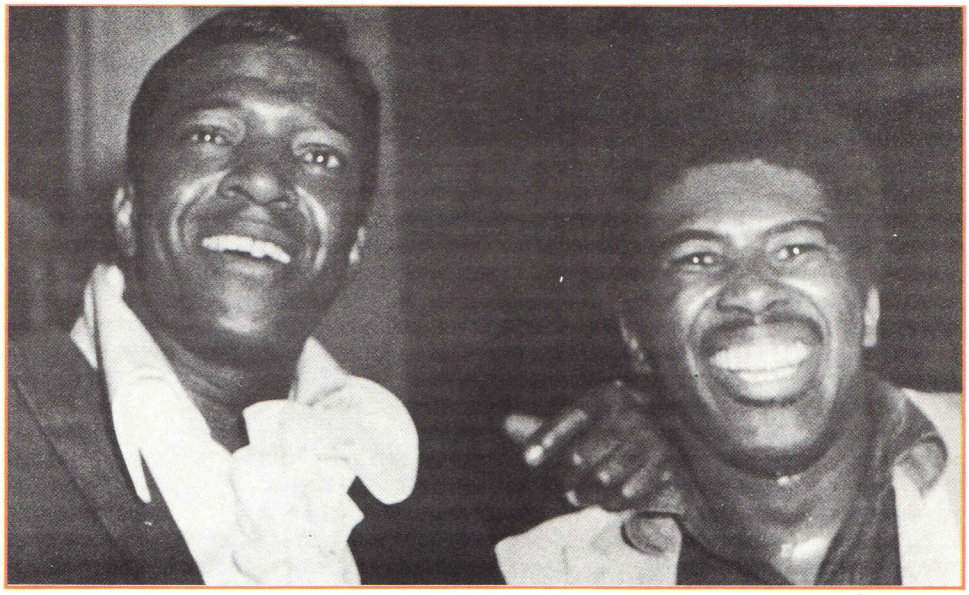
Their innovations were important to black music. They were the first black group to combine a string orchestra with a Latin-American rhythm section, for example, and the first to move from the sounds and syntax of the ghetto into the world of white teenage experience – balmy summer evenings, beach parties, drive-ins, and that first longed-for romance. At the same time, their material cut deeper than songs about a boy who just had to have a girl. Long before Bob Dylan discovered Chuck Berry, the Drifters perfected the universally popular sound of sophisticated R&B allied to socially perceptive lyrics. They brought serious issues into popular song by singing of 'Mexican Divorce', of the tenement youth with problems (he went 'Up On The Roof' to sort them out), the struggle to stay alive and provide for a family (as in 'Rat Race') and the frustration of the American Dream ('On Broadway'). But however concerned the message, it was always wedded to a catchy melody.

The Drifters were formed in 1953 as a back-up group for Clyde McPhatter, the exciting Atlantic acquisition. In those first sessions the line-up was McPhatter (lead tenor), Gerhart Thrasher (tenor), Andrew Thrasher (baritone) and Bill Pinkney (bass). Over the years McPhatter's place was filled by various lead singers including David Baughn, Johnny Moore – who was still with the Drifters in the Eighties – Bobby Hendricks, Ben E. King, Rudy Lewis and Bill Fredericks. Despite increasingly complex personnel changes – more than 50 different singers

have drifted in and out again – the Drifters' records have continued to be hits for more than 25 years, a time-span unsurpassed by any other group.

By 1956 their discs were crossing over from the largely black R&B market into the middle reaches of the Hot Hundred, where the group scored with 'Fools Fall In Love' and, in 1957, 'Hypnotized' (a cover of Terry Noland's rockabilly record). They were one of Atlantic's money-spinners, and their career was carefully watched over by Atlantic's bosses, Ahmet Ertegun and Jerry Wexler.

In 1958, producer-songwriters Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller produced the Drifters for the first time. The group had cut Leiber-Stoller songs before ('Ruby Baby' in 1955 and 'Fools Fall In Love' in 1956) but now that Leiber and Stoller had moved from Los Angeles to New York, Wexler and Ertegun relinquished production. 'It was', said Wexler, 'a horrendously hair-raising notion to let somebody else do the Drifters.' 'Drip Drop', a pounding Bobby Hendricks-led rocker, was strongly redolent of 'Money Honey', the group's first ever release. Although it made only 58 on the Hot Hundred it was the biggest national hit the Drifters had yet enjoyed.



The group's new-found success was attended by personal difficulties and conflicts. Gerhart Thrasher, their wonderful tenor, consumed alcohol to a degree that would not be universally described as moderate, and the group as a whole did not get on with manager George Treadwell. Towards the end of 1958, Treadwell became so exasperated that he sacked the entire group.

Above: Two of the Drifters' most famous lead voices were owned by Clyde McPhatter (left) and Ben E. King (right). Opposite: The 1975 Drifters in concert. Below left: The way they were – the Drifters in 1953. Below right: The Crowns took on the famous name in 1959.

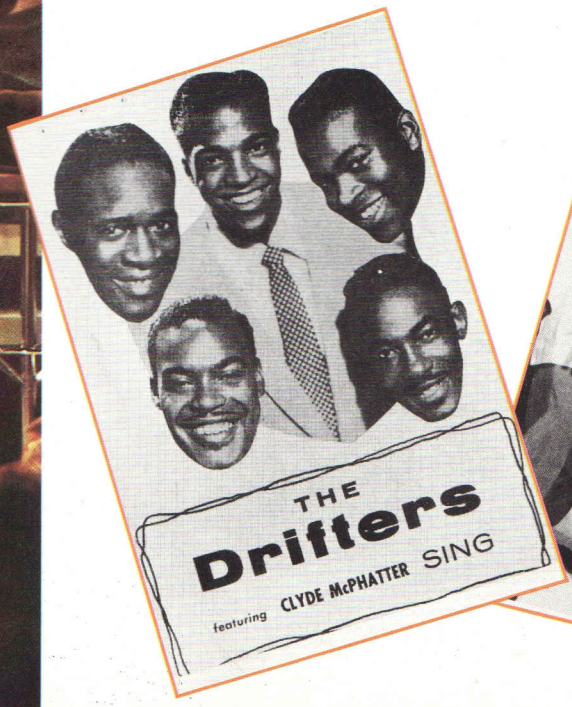
The new Drifters

A full year elapsed, in which no Drifters recorded for Atlantic. 'Nobody made a move', recalled Wexler, 'until it occurred to me to call George Treadwell and point out that we had a valuable property in the name and that we ought to get a new set of singers. In a matter of two or three months he came up with Ben E. King and the Crowns.'

Under contract to present the Drifters twice yearly at New York's Apollo Theatre, Treadwell had signed a group of young New Yorkers and it was a simple matter to change their name from the Crowns to the Drifters. It is this group that is perhaps most fondly remembered. The initial members were Ben E. King (lead baritone), Charles Thomas (tenor), Doc Green (baritone) and Elsbeary Hobbs (bass).

The liaison between Leiber and Stoller and the new Drifters immediately produced one of the most influential records of all time – 'There Goes My Baby'. Released in 1959, it went to Number 2. The combination of Ben E. King's plaintive, gospel-rooted lead voice, a Latin rhythm section and symphonic strings sold a million copies and gave the popular music industry entirely new ideas.

The introduction of the string section to gospelly R&B unleashed a trend that was



as significant to popular music as the invention of amplification. Black groups had rarely recorded with strings; after 'There Goes My Baby' they rarely recorded without them. In addition, subtle Latin-American rhythms came to permeate pop music; indeed, Burt Bacharach learned a great deal by attending these Drifters sessions. The musical press called the new sound 'Beat Concerto' but George Treadwell was more prosaic: 'We use strings and a guitar with a rock'n'roll beat to back it and carry the voices of the quartet on top. It's a heck of a sound.'

Before leaving the Drifters to embark on a solo career, Ben E. King also sang the sparkling lead vocals on 'Dance With Me', 'This Magic Moment', 'Lonely Winds' and 'Save The Last Dance For Me'; this last topped the Hot Hundred in 1960.

Producing the hits

One of the wittiest lyricists to have worked in pop, Jerry Leiber found that he was unable to supply the high romance with which the Drifters were now identified, so the group turned to some of the other top pop composers of the early Sixties. These included Doc Pomus and Mort Shuman, Gerry Goffin and Carole King, Barry Mann and Cynthia Weill, Artie Resnick and Kenny Young, and Jeff Barry and Ellie Greenwich.

Leiber and Stoller continued to produce the group, however. They used a lush string section and encased the mellow voice of King's replacement, Rudy Lewis, in a number of startling arrangements. The devices used included a chorus of chanting girls – among whom were Dionne Warwick, her sister Dee Dee, Cissy Houston and Doris Troy – which echoed the lead singer's line in a device borrowed from the black church service.

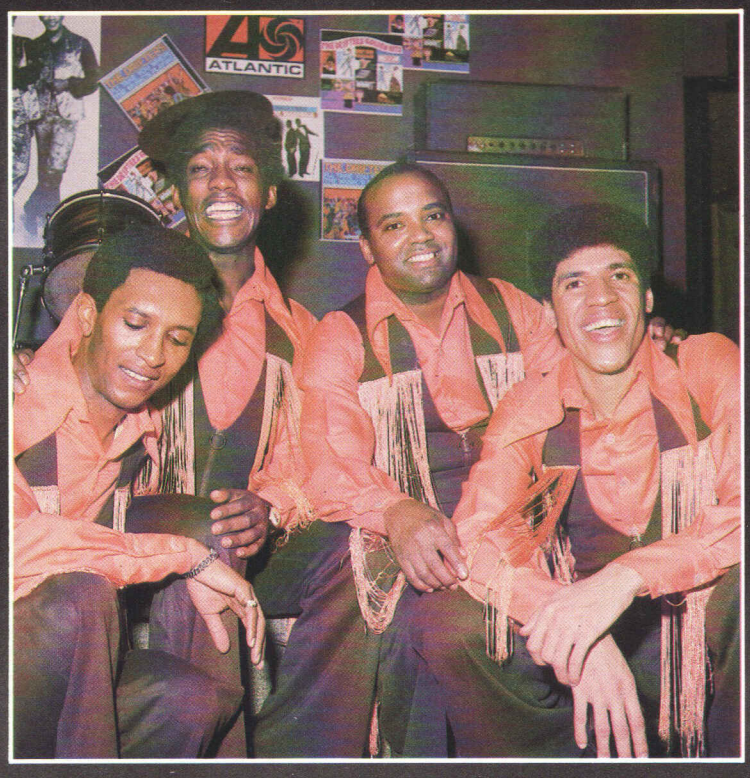
Distaff vocals or not, 'Some Kind Of Wonderful', 'Please Stay', 'Sweets For My Sweet' (which featured a Cuban guajira rhythm), 'When My Little Girl Is Smiling', 'Up On The Roof' and 'On Broadway' hit the best-selling charts in a dozen countries from 1961 to 1963.

'Under The Boardwalk', co-produced by Bert Berns and English arranger Mike Leander, was even more successful in 1964. 'I took the song from Ed Burton's publishing firm and gave it to them,' explained Jerry Wexler. 'Neither of them liked the song, nor did the Drifters. But I had final say on the material, which I rarely ever exercised. However, I told Bert and the group that "Boardwalk" was a must, so it was included.'

'Rudy Lewis died from an overdose [of drugs] on the morning of the session. We got union approval to put it off 'til the next day and, in the evening, we put the voices on, with Johnny Moore singing the lead. There was an uncanny mood. Johnny was great and the group was incredibly good.'

The Drifters were deeply affected by Rudy's death; their distress and Bert Berns' talent for creating emotionally convincing records turned 'Under The Board-

Right: The Drifters in 1961 featured lead tenor Rudy Lewis (standing right). Far right: The 1964 line-up of 'Under The Boardwalk' fame, with guitarist Billy Davis. Below right: The same personnel on stage in London, 1965. Bottom: On the fringe of a renewed chart career in 1972. Below: Johnny Moore, whose voice graced the Drifters' mid-Seventies UK hits.



walk', a happy-go-lucky story of summer love and female charm, into an atmospheric soul disc of unrivalled poignancy. Johnny Moore sings of having fun but there's a mournful, bitter edge to his voice and it's difficult to believe him.

Bert Berns had taken over the role of producer when Leiber and Stoller became involved in other projects, and he worked with the Drifters until he died of a heart attack in 1967. His productions with Jerry Wexler included 'Saturday Night At The Movies', which reached Number 3 in the UK on reissue in 1972, 'At The Club' and 'Come On Over To My Place'. They prefigured the discotheque sound of the Seventies and were hits in Britain years after they were originally made, another indication of the durability of the music.

Decline and revival

There was a short period, during the late Sixties, when the Drifters' run of machine-tooled, mass-produced and market-tested hits began to flag. It was the era of fuzzy-sounding guitars, hippydom and more aggressive black sounds. The Drifters dabbled unsuccessfully in these developments, moving away from the predictability that had ensured their popularity. In 1972, they left Atlantic and signed with the Bell label.

The new company obtained material from the top pop writers of the Seventies: Paul McCartney, Barry Mason, Roger Greenaway and his partner Roger Cook, Tony Macauley, and Neil Diamond. 'With Roger Greenaway we merely updated our old sound', Johnny Moore has said. British producers understood the need to hear the Drifters performing songs that sounded familiar, and they revitalised the group's career in the UK in mid-decade with material such as 'Kissing In The Back Row Of The Movies' (which reached Number 2 in 1974), 'Like Sister And Brother', 'Down On The Beach Tonight' and 'There Goes My First Love'. These British hits made little impact in the United States, although they complemented, rather than imitated, the glories of the past.

In fact, the Drifters had far more success in Britain in the Seventies than they did in the Sixties, when their big American hits were covered by the Mudlarks, the Searchers, Kenny Lynch, Cliff Bennett, Jimmy Justice, Craig Douglas, the Rolling Stones and the Moody Blues. Yet the Drifters' records always evoked the pure spirit of pop, and although they are no longer an innovatory force, the group succeeded in creating a sound that was undeniably unique. BILL MILLAR

The Drifters
Recommended Listening

Their Greatest Recordings – The Early Years (Atco SD 33-375) (Includes: Money Honey, White Christmas and There Goes My Baby); *24 Original Hits* (Atlantic K60106) (Includes: Save The Last Dance, Up On The Roof, Under The Boardwalk, Kissin' In The Back Row Of The Movies and Down On The Beach Tonight).

AT SMOKEY JOE'S CAFE

How the Coasters made rock's greatest comedy records

THE SONGWRITERS AND PRODUCERS Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller developed an unusually adventurous method of recording black singers, using material they often wrote themselves and enhancing the sound by employing hitherto unorthodox studio techniques. For the Coasters they wrote and produced a string of what might be called individual morality plays, in which they distilled a neat and witty confection of gritty and perceptive lyrics. The overall concept led to no fewer than 17 US hit records between 1955 and 1962. These included some of the most innovative and influential records in rock's history.

The story of the Coasters really begins with the formation of a group known as the Robins, who worked with Johnny Otis before meeting Leiber and Stoller in 1951. During the previous five years, the Robins had helped make Los Angeles the most important centre in the development of postwar R&B. They recorded for Excelsior, Score, Aladdin and Savoy, and hit the R&B Top Ten on two occasions in 1950. The following year, for Modern, the group cut Leiber and Stoller's 'That's What The Good Book Says'. In Leiber's view it was a botched version of a blues and gospel number, 'a pretty bad song but the first record we ever got'.

In 1953 the Robins were signed to RCA-Victor and recorded Leiber and Stoller's first prison song, 'Ten Days In Jail'. The disc illustrated some of this song-writing team's stock production devices, particularly the intrusion of a warm bass voice that echoed a doleful or witty line. This mannerism would soon permeate the novelty records of many black vocal groups.

Recording for Spark

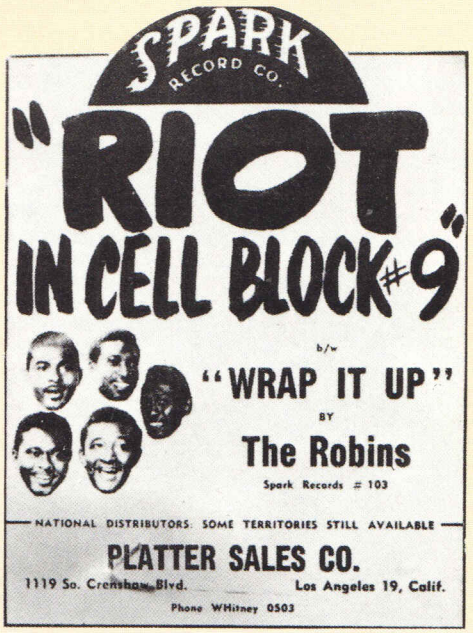
Later in 1953 Leiber and Stoller formed Spark, their own record company. 'At the time', recalled Robins bass singer Bobby Nunn, 'they were living in the coloured district down on Pico. I heard 'em say "We're gonna be millionaires in a couple of years."' The Robins cut seven singles for Spark, including 'Riot In Cell Block Number 9' and 'Framed'. Both songs were exceptionally good examples of R&B and went deep into the heart of ghetto life.

Their final record for Spark was 'Smokey Joe's Cafe' (1955). It displayed the carefully contrived and well-integrated lyrics and music for which the Coasters would become internationally famous. It was another in a long series of

The initial Coasters line-up (left inset) was, from left, Carl Gardner, Bobby Nunn, Billy Guy and Leon Hughes in front. In the late Fifties (below) the personnel was, from left, Guy, Will 'Dub' Jones, Gardner and Cornelius Gunter, seen with guitarist Adolph Jacobs. This is the same line-up, minus Jacobs, in the photo inset at right. Right: The Coasters in 1972.

compact vignettes that dramatised aspects of seamy, sleazy low-life. Smokey Joe's cafe belongs in the same category as the alleys, strip clubs, pawn shops, street corners, race tracks, prisons and blue-light diners to which the Coasters would return again and again.

'Smokey Joe' (bass singer Bobby Nunn) threatens the lead singer (Carl Gardner), and his use of cutlery is not likely to be confined to eating beans. The deliciously neat characterisation and atmosphere evoked, put lyricist Jerry Leiber on a par with Chuck Berry as a leading poet of rock'n'roll. Filled with rhythms you'd expect to hear in a border-town bar-cum-brothel, Smokey Joe's cafe was the sort of place where you could get your kicks and experience your share of strong sensations.



Above: One of the first of the great songs, from the then Robins' pre-Atlantic days.

On the strength of the Robins' records Atlantic signed Leiber and Stoller to an independent production deal in 1955. Some of the Robins left, but Gardner (a dance band vocalist from Texas) and Nunn (originally from Alabama) recruited Billy Guy (another Texan) and Leon Hughes to form the Coasters. They were so-named by their manager, Lester Sill, to identify them with the West Coast. Hughes, more of a dancer than a singer, was quickly replaced by Young Jessie.

Double-sided smash

In 1957 the fresh line-up enjoyed a massive hit with 'Searchin'', the first of the group's songs to draw inspiration from the annals of criminal detection. The song remained on the best-seller list for six months, reaching Number 5, while the reverse, 'Young Blood', also made the Top Ten. 'Young Blood', a suggestive girl-following song, was about sexual arousal, about being transfixed by comic-strip beauty.

The girls in the Coasters' songs were petite and precocious with tight sweaters and big round eyes. They were also very young. They were subject to parental disciplines, they went roller skating and they skipped around in the park.

In 'Young Blood' the male group are totally besotted and their agitation increases until they're barely able to keep their trousers on. Ultimately the street-corner lechers – four middle-aged blacks, remember – reveal a potentially dangerous form of inadequacy, following the young girl all the way home. The innuendo becomes so heavy you half expect a contraceptive to roll out of the record sleeve. Things, however, go bad – they meet her Dad, who says (in the bassman's gloriously deep voice), 'You better leave my daughter alone.'

All this was heady stuff back in 1957. The Coasters' mumbled lyrics were not only educationally destructive; they were also said to undermine the moral fibre of white children.

After several less-heralded goodies such as 'Idol With The Golden Head' and 'What Is The Secret Of Your Success', the Coasters moved to New York, where Cornelius Gunter from the Flairs and Will 'Dub' Jones from the Cadets replaced Young Jessie and Bobby Nunn. They were joined in the studio by King Curtis, whose tenor sax interjections became an integral part of the group's records. The new line-up, which remained unchanged for the next four years and sang on all of the Coasters' biggest hits, re-embarked on a comic tradition from which American rock has never entirely departed.

'Hello Charlie Brown'

Although they had made nuggets before, the Coasters did not achieve worldwide fame until 'Yakety Yak' raced up the charts on both sides of the Atlantic in 1958. The title is a throwaway comment at the end of each verse. It follows a list of parental instructions and threats – 'If you don't scrub that kitchen floor, you ain't gonna rock'n'roll no more' – which helped to define the generation gap. 'Charlie Brown', which reached Number 2 in 1959, was set in the same context. In it the Coasters enumerate Charlie's feeble attacks on authority, while the bass voice gives expression to his wholly unbelievable innocence with the line 'Why's everybody always pickin' on me?'.

The wheedlesome, subservient voices and Charlie's simple-minded nonconformism have prompted musicians and writers to complain that Leiber and Stoller created stereotypes of black people and got too many of their laughs by making clowns out of black vocalists. But the R&B singer, long preoccupied with crime, sex, food and gambling, created his own stereotype of himself; Otis Redding, for example, sang of chicken-stealing.

Skilful publicity helps sales. Leiber and Stoller pose with a yak at Bronx Zoo to promote 'Yakety Yak' (below right), while later endeavours (below) emphasise the Coasters' group image. Bottom: Interviewing the group on radio, 1982.

More importantly, the Coasters were clearly irreverent and opposed institutions that white adults held in high esteem. Authority, parents, fidelity, hard work, piety and the suppression of risky pleasures were questioned with a bold and subversive wit. Jews (Leiber and Stoller) and Southern blacks (the Coasters) were expected to show gratitude towards the system. Instead they stood up and criticised it, a theme that can be recognised in almost all their songs. Southern justice, managerial power and the gulf between black and white were satirised mercilessly. Even the banality of television Westerns came in for gentle parody; the lyrics of 'Along Came Jones' (Number 9 in 1959) were funnier than any horse-opera dialogue you ever heard.

Equally, few records were as contagious as 'Poison Ivy' (Number 7 in 1959) or the flip, 'I'm A Hog For You', where the splicing together of a repeated guitar note and grunts and squeals from the tenor sax created a vivid aural picture of pigs feeding at a trough. It demonstrates another of the fundamental reasons for the Coasters' appeal: if you *did* miss the point you could still marvel at the sound. 'Yakety Yak' and the other discs mentioned above guaranteed the Coasters a permanent place in rock's Hall of Fame and remain unparalleled over 20 years later.

The group remained with Leiber and Stoller into the Sixties and the combina-

tion resulted in further risible gems that brought vocal group production to impressive new heights. 'Shoppin' For Clothes' (1960) resembled Chuck Berry's love of automobile gadgetry in its sartorial obsessiveness. The hero is looking for a suit with solid gold buttons, a camel-hair collar and the 'cutaway, flap-over twice'. Billy Guy invested this record, 'Girls, Girls, Girls' and 'Little Egypt' (both 1961) with the crafty timing of a long-experienced vaudeville actor.

Arguably the Coasters' last real classic, 'Little Egypt' concerned a stripper who began her act wearing nothing but a button and a bow. She ends up marrying the lecherous singer who concludes:

> Little Egypt doesn't dance there any more
> She's too busy moppin' and a-takin' care of shoppin' at the store
> 'Cos we've got seven kids and all day long they crawl around the floor.

Guy snorts the lyrics with the arrogant air of one who can now enjoy Little Egypt's performance every night of the week. The record was subjected to a widespread ban in the South, but it rivalled the very best Coasters discs in every way.

A switch of labels

Leiber and Stoller left the Coasters in 1963, and the group played out their Atlantic contract without any chart success thereafter. In 1967 there was news of a reconciliation. The group were signed to Date, a CBS subsidiary, and fresh Leiber and Stoller productions followed, including 'Soul Pad', 'Down Home Girl' and 'D. W. Washburn'. 'Down Home Girl' was flecked with country-blues imagery, while 'Soul Pad' parodied health food, psychedelic rock, mysticism and other facets of counterculture. All the songs were as sharp as anything Jerry Leiber had ever written, but the producers failed to get the full support of CBS. The songs achieved more success in the hands of such artists as the Monkees ('D. W. Washburn') and the Rolling Stones ('Down Home Girl').

After a further hiatus the Coasters returned to the charts in 1971 with another Leiber and Stoller production, 'Love Potion Number 9'. Since then the group has pottered about on a variety of small labels without the benefit of Leiber and Stoller's wizardry.

The historical contribution of the Coasters is real enough, however. There were cover versions and revivals by, for example, the Hollies, Lord Sutch, the Beatles, the Fourmost, Ray Charles, the Lambrettas and the Tremeloes. The Coasters' black (in both senses of the word) humour had a formidable influence on such diverse artists as Frank Zappa, social satirist Shel Silverstein and Eddie Cochran – Cochran's records often featured that moronic, disembodied bass voice. And no less a black progressive than Curtis Mayfield stated: 'I especially loved the Coasters . . . they were my biggest inspiration.' Many groups tried to imitate the Coasters, but – unlike the imitations – the Coasters' records improve with age.

BILL MILLAR

The Coasters
Recommended Listening

The Coasters (Atco LP SD 33-101) (Includes: One Kiss Led To Another, Searchin', Riot in Cell Block Number 9, Young Blood and Down In Mexico).

Below: The Coasters clown between numbers in Berlin, 1974. Right: King Curtis, whose vibrant solo sax enlivened many tracks.

GOLDEN PLATTERS

The Platters were equally adept at smooth posing (above) and smooth crooning (opposite), thanks to Buck Ram.

The most successful singing group of the Fifties

THE PLATTERS sold 50 million records to become the most successful black doo-woppers in the history of rock. They were assembled, coached and directed by Buck Ram, a white lawyer in his forties who believed that a fusion of R&B beat and lush orchestral sounds would have a strong emotional appeal. In an era when black music was generally tagged as smutty or subversive, Ram's smooth, string-filled arrangements of comforting Tin Pan Alley songs stood out as a new departure. It was an innovation that proved to be a winner.

Born in Chicago in 1908, Ram studied law at the University of Illinois and was called to the bar in California in 1933. While advocacy pleased his parents, Ram was more interested in music, which he both wrote and arranged. He quickly became successful and worked with the bands of Duke Ellington and Count Basie, establishing himself with songs like 'Afterglow', 'At Your Beck And Call' and, in 1943, 'Twilight Time', which was a huge hit for the Three Suns. The following year Columbia Records asked him to write a film score. The contract fell through, however, and Ram had a nervous breakdown. By the time he recovered, the popular appeal of big bands had waned and R&B vocal groups were appearing in the hitherto-segregated pop charts.

Ram set up Personality Promotions in Los Angeles with a young secretary, Jeannie Bennett, in 1954. Most agencies

rode with the winners; but the inexperienced artists, the strugglers and the losers – those most in need of a lawyer – flocked in Ram's direction. He began with a country act but his first R&B group, the Penguins, sold a million copies with 'Earth Angel'. With this Top Ten success, Ram's stable of performers grew rapidly to include Shirley Gunther and the Queens, Dolly Cooper, Linda Hayes and the Harris Sisters.

Linda Hayes introduced Ram to her brother, Tony Williams. 'I watched Tony sing "My Buddy" in an amateur contest', recalled Ram. 'He was tremendous, but I didn't know what to do with him 'cos he wasn't country, rock'n'roll or race as such. He said he'd been singing with a group called the Platters, who'd already had a record on Syd Nathan's Federal label. They all came up to my tiny office on Western Avenue and, boy, they were horrible! The harmony was really off and Tony was the only one who sounded any good.' With Tony Williams that day were David Lynch, Alex Hodge and Herbert Reed.

'We'd rehearse every night spending hours on one song which really bugged me. We'd play juke-box meeting places and local contests for a race disc jockey, Hunter Hancock, just for food – never any money! Having seen that cute little kid Zola Taylor with Shirley Gunther's Queens, I decided to put her with the Platters just to smarten the group up. When we went in to record "Only You" the group were pretty nervous and Zola, 15 years old, was scared to death. We gave her some wine but she started throwing up and the record was terrible.'

Ram begged Nathan not to release it, and he said he'd think it over. Nathan then said that he wanted to use the Platters to make a record with Linda Hayes. Asked Ram: 'OK, how much you gonna pay 'em?' Replied Nathan: '*Pay 'em?* I'm not gonna pay 'em *anything* for just oop-oop-a-doopin'.'

The move to Mercury

Eventually Ram took the Platters to Mercury, as makeweight in the deal in which the company acquired the Penguins. Alex Hodge had left the Platters after the Federal sides, and the new line-up consisted of Tony Williams (lead), David Lynch (tenor), Zola Taylor (utility voice and pretty face), Paul Robi (baritone) and Herb Reed (bass). They recorded a fresh version of 'Only You', which Ram had written, with Ernie Freeman's band and Ram on piano. Mercury issued the record but still put their main efforts into promoting the Penguins.

'We almost lost "Only You"', said Ram. 'The Hilltoppers copied it and their version was a hit in lots of places the Platters hadn't reached. Jeannie [Bennett] was on the road for nine months, taking the record around the disc jockeys. They'd say "Here comes the girl with the party records", 'cos rhythm an' blues had a dirty name then. Suddenly we got an order for 5000 records from Seattle, and when I told Mercury they said "Aw that's a mistake, it must be the Penguins' record". But Mercury was a running company – the minute they smelled a hit they covered all the jocks, boy they really knew what to do with the satchel [of money].

'We soon had a big smash record and what transpired after that was just fantastic. Alan Freed sold Columbia an idea for making a rock picture, *Rock Around The Clock*, and we had the two top songs – "Only You" and "The Great Pretender" – in it. That's what did it. We had calls from all over the world after that.'

'Only You' made Number 5 in 1955 and 'The Great Pretender' entered the charts towards the end of that year and went right to the top. Both were million-sellers.

For the next five years the Platters remained in the charts with hits like 'The Magic Touch' (Number 4), 'My Prayer' (1) and 'You'll Never Never Know' (14), all in 1956; 'I'm Sorry' (Number 19 in 1957); 'Twilight Time' (1 in 1958); 'Smoke Gets In Your Eyes' (1) and 'Enchanted' (12), both in 1959; and 'Harbour Lights' (8) and 'To Each His Own' (21) in 1960. Half of these, as well as another 23 Hot Hundred entries, were standard popular ballads given a rock feel with piano triplets; the sound was made distinctive by the symphonic strings and the high, churchy voice of Tony Williams.

Sounds from the Churches

Ram, who wrote some of the group's biggest hits, attributes the synthesis to his musical background. 'R&B was nothing new to me. I grew up next to a Baptist church in Chicago and I used to creep in and listen to the sounds. People told me "You write like a spade", and that's because a lot of the black rock'n'roll hits were adaptations of sounds that came from the churches. I also like classical music but I don't see any contradiction. I go for people with heart – Shostakovich and Tchaikovsky – and country and R&B are similar in that respect.'

With the Platters' success, the demand for Ram's services grew. He managed the Cues, the Colts (whose 'Adorable' was covered by the Drifters), the Empires, Joe Houston, and the Flairs. For Ram, the Flairs were better than the Platters: 'They were really dedicated, so fresh, so energetic and so perfectly in tune. But talent is not enough.' He also managed the Teen Queens ('Eddie My Love' was a Top Thirty pop hit in 1956), Johnny Olenn (who appeared in *The Girl Can't Help It*) and the Block Busters (who appeared in *Rock All Night*).

Just as their songs had formal orchestral arrangements, so the Platters were not permitted to dance suggestively or look like hoodlums. Although there were several well-publicised sexual misdemeanours and the four male members of the group were arraigned on vice charges in October 1959, their image remained relatively wholesome, which was not always the case with Ram's other acts. Betty Collins of the Teen Queens died from an overdose of drugs, for example, while Bruce Tate of the Penguins went berserk and killed an old lady. 'They were nice kids', said Ram, 'but they were so young and underprivileged. They'd come right off the streets, never seen the inside of a hotel or a radio station and suddenly the money's coming at them from so many different directions.'

Above: Buck Ram (second left, back row) receives a gold disc from Mercury. Below: The latter-day Buck Ram Platters.

The Platters survived the lean years of the British invasion in the early Sixties and returned to the Hot Hundred later in the decade with a handful of hits on the Musicor label. These included 'I Love You 1000 Times', which reached Number 31 in 1966, and 'With This Ring', Number 14 in 1967. It was a short-lived renaissance, however, for the magic had gone when the group's lead singer, Tony Williams, left in 1961.

'It all started crumbling then', said Ram. 'Tony had an argument with Herb Reed. Herb was very malicious. He couldn't sing himself – the only song I got outa him was "16 Tons" and it took me two days 'cos he'd go flat all the time – and he used to stand behind Tony on stage and mutter "Ah you drunken bastard" and continually aggravate him. Tony has this neurotic insecurity and just couldn't take it.

'Johnny Barnes filled in for a while and then we got Sonny Turner, who was on all the Musicor hits. Sonny came from Cleveland and none of the Platters liked him 'cos he was short and sang falsetto and they all thought he was a fairy. I said "What the heck he's a great singer, I think he can make it". The other Platters couldn't sing, see?

'In some of the sessions we did on Musicor I just used Sonny and four other voices, we didn't even use the group. Naturally I don't go around saying that 'cos there's a certain glamour in people wanting to associate the singers they see onstage with the record that comes out.'

The number of groups calling themselves the Platters is legion because, as each member left to form a quartet of his own, he continued to use the name.

'Tony Williams, Herb Reed, Sonny Turner – they'd all have the right to have their own group of Platters if they hadn't previously accepted up to 20,000 dollars to relinquish their rights to the name. Back in '56 I started Five Platters Inc. Each member had stock in it, got their bonuses from it and signed a contract to say they'd give up the name if they ever left. When each one leaves, the corporation pays them a fat sum and I let them retain the right to all royalties on the records which they sang on. If you write a song you can copyright it for the whole world but with group names you have to prove unfair competition to get an injunction in each state of the USA.'

Of the original members, Herb Reed toured with a set of surrogate Platters; Zola Taylor and Paul Robi took their own group to Australia, and Tony Williams formed another group of Platters with his wife. David Lynch died of cancer in January 1981.

The confusion created by spurious groups has cost the Ram Corporation half a million dollars in legal fees and has led the veteran songwriter to link his name to the group managed by Jeannie Bennett: hence the Buck Ram Platters, who still tour the cabaret spots of the world. While members come and go, Ram's musical directorship remains unchanged.

BILL MILLAR

The Platters
Recommended Listening

20 Classic Hits (Mercury 9100-049) (Includes: Only You, The Great Pretender, The Magic Touch, My Prayer, I'm Sorry, Twilight Time, Smoke Gets In Your Eyes, Harbor Lights and Red Sails In The Sunset).